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ABSTRACT

Japan's educational system, in particular its K-12 schools, remains one of the very best in the world. This digest provides an overview of the following topics: (1) Japanese educational achievements; (2) the structure of K-12 education in Japan; (3) the K-12 curriculum, with an emphasis on social studies education; (4) educational reform in Japan; and (5) Web sites on Japanese education. (BB)

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Japanese Education in Grades K-12

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Japan's educational system, in particular its K-12 schools, remains one of the very best in the world. This Digest provides an overview of 1) Japanese educational achievements, 2) the structure of K-12 education in Japan, 3) the K-12 curriculum, with an emphasis on social studies education, 4) educational reform in Japan, and 5) World Wide Web sites on Japanese education.

Japanese Educational Achievements. Japan's greatest educational achievement is the high-quality basic education most young people receive by the time they complete high school. In international mathematics tests, Japanese students rank either at or near the top year after year. Recent statistics indicate that well over 95 percent of Japanese are literate, which is particularly impressive since the Japanese language is one of the world's most difficult languages to read and write. Over 95 percent of Japanese also graduate from high school compared to 88 percent of American students. Some Japanese education specialists estimate that the average Japanese high school graduate has attained about the same level of education as the average American after two years of college. Japanese employees of large companies and government ministries rank among the most well-educated workers on earth.

Structure of K-12 Education. Even though the Japanese adopted the American 6-3-3 model during the U.S. occupation of Japan after World War II, elementary and secondary education is much more centralized than in the United States. Control over curriculum rests largely with the national Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (*Monbukagakusho*) and education is compulsory through the ninth grade. Municipalities and private sources fund kindergartens, but national, prefectural, and local governments pay almost equal shares of educational costs for students in grades one through nine. Well over 90 percent of students attend public schools through the ninth grade, but over 25 percent of students go to private high schools. The percentage of national funding for high schools is quite low, with prefectures and municipalities assuming most of the costs for public high schools. There are important differences between Japanese and American teachers and administrators. High salaries, considerable prestige, and very low birth rates make teaching jobs difficult to obtain in Japan while in the United States there are increasing teacher shortages. While more Japanese schools are acquiring specialists such as special education teachers and counselors, American schools have many more special subjects and support personnel than schools in Japan. The typical Japanese school has only two administrators: a principal and a head teacher.

Many American public high schools are comprehensive. While there are a few comprehensive high schools in Japan, they are not popular. Between 75 and 80 percent of all Japanese students enroll in university preparation tracks. Most university-bound students attend separate academic high schools while students who definitely do not plan on higher education attend separate commercial or industrial high schools. In the United States, students enter secondary schools based on either school district assignment or personal choice. For the overwhelming majority of students in Japan, high school and university admissions primarily are contingent upon entrance examination performance. The best Japanese high schools and universities require high entrance examination scores. Since many Japanese employers continue to base hiring decisions on the prestige level of the educational institution an applicant attended, ambitious students attend private cram schools, or *juku*, and study long hours for both high school and university entrance examinations. The futures of most Japanese high school students depend largely on the high school they attended and their college entrance examination scores.

Japanese students spend at least six weeks longer in school each year than their American counterparts, since summer vacations in Japan last only half the time of most summer breaks in the U.S. Until the mid-1990s Japanese students attended school half days on Saturday, but weekend attendance is being gradually phased out and all Saturday school will end by the beginning of the 2002 school year in April.

The K-12 Curriculum. While the Japan K-12 curriculum is quite similar to the curriculum of U.S. schools, there are important differences. Because Japanese teachers at all levels are better prepared in mathematics then their American counterparts, instruction in that subject is more sophisticated in Japan. Japanese language instruction receives more attention in Japanese schools than English instruction in the United States because of the difficulty of learning written Japanese. Virtually every Japanese student takes English language courses from the seventh grade through the final year of high school.

Japanese elementary students study social studies in an integrated science/social studies course. Beginning in third grade and continuing through high school, there are separate courses in civics, geography, Japanese history and world history, sociology, and politics-economics. University-bound students may elect to take more or fewer social studies electives depending upon their career interests. A goal of the new educational reforms that are being implemented during the 2002 school year is to increase use of task-oriented research approaches in secondary social studies and to decrease emphasis upon retention of large amounts of factual content.

One recurring problem in history instruction in Japan is the way textbooks often depict Japanese actions during World War II. Japanese atrocities tend to be minimized or ignored in school history textbooks. All Japanese texts are written and produced in the private sector; however, the texts must be

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approved by the Ministry of Education. The latest controversy occurred in 2001 when the Ministry of Education approved a new junior high school textbook written and edited by a group of nationalist academics. The book omitted topics such as the Japanese Army's mistreatment of women in battle zones and areas under Japanese rule and the Japanese Army's actions in China. After strong protests from the South Korean and Chinese governments, the Japanese government had the book reviewed and revised. The book was then published in summer 2001. Although less than 10 percent of all junior high schools in Japan is expected to actually use the book, the Chinese and South Korean governments were still not satisfied with the published version.

Many Japanese believe schools should teach not only academic skills but good character traits as well. While a small number of hours every year are devoted to moral education in the national curriculum, there is substantial anecdotal evidence that teachers do not take the instructional time too seriously and often use it for other purposes. Still, Japanese teachers endeavor to inculcate good character traits in students through the hidden curriculum. For example, all Japanese students and teachers clean school buildings every week. Japanese students are constantly exhorted by teachers to practice widely admired societal traits such as putting forth intense effort on any task and responding to greetings from teachers in a lively manner.

Educational Reform. Despite Japanese students' impressive performance when compared to their peers in other developed nations, there is widespread dissatisfaction on the part of many Japanese about the nation's educational system. Many Japanese believe that the examination system is too stressful, that the schools are too rigid and don't meet the needs of individual students, that contemporary students show little interest in studying, and that the educational system needs to produce more creative and flexible citizens for the twenty-first century. Also, large numbers of Japanese blame the schools for a perceived increase in child misbehavior, particularly in junior highs.

Beginning with the 2002 school year, major curricular reform will occur in an attempt to make schools more flexible and responsive to individual student needs. Nearly one-third of the elementary and junior high curricula will be eliminated with deep cuts in all major subjects. The replacement classroom activity will be a new endeavor entitled Integrated Studies that will have few guidelines and no accompanying textbooks. The goal of Integrated Studies is to provide students and teachers the freedom to study whatever interests them whether the topic is religion, the environment, or foreign affairs. Some elementary schools that were selected as pilot sites for Integrated Studies in 2001 experimented with teaching English during this time block.

There are also new controversial recommendations emanating from an educational advisory body appointed by the late Prime Minister Obuchi that call for mandatory community service for junior high school and high school students. The same advisory body, in an effort to make higher education more flexible, has called for allowing students in special cases to enter university at age 15 instead of 18. It also recommends that university entrance examinations be made less central to the educational system than it is now. At present, there are few signs that entrance examinations at any level in Japan are diminishing in importance. Unless entrance examination reform occurs, Japan's educational system will continue to emphasize the acquisition of large amounts of fact-based content.

World Wide Web Sites. The following Web sites include information on various aspects of education in Japan.

- National Clearinghouse for U.S. - Japan Studies and Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for U.S. - Japan Studies at the Social Studies Development Center of Indiana University: <http://www.indiana.edu/~japan/iguides/edu.html>. This Internet guide to Education and Student Life in Japan provides numerous links to other Web sites on various aspects of Japanese education.
- *Monbukagakusho:* <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/>. This is the Web site of Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology.

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

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